

## [The Sunshine Lady]

### THE SUNSHINE LADY

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Mrs. Neille Wesenger

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A. R.

Some years ago our Sunday School class discovered the "Sunshine Lady" of the Richmond County Home. One Sunday afternoon the little prayer [band?] went out to the institution to hold services with the shut-ins. When we arrived, we told the superintendent that we had heard of her and asked if she was still there.

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"Yes, she is here." He replied. "But I know that you girls belong to a Protestant church. She is a Catholic and the Priest comes out to see her once a week."

This dampened our spirits to some extent, but we decided to visit her even [if?] she did not want to take part in the services. The superintendent directed us to a two-story clapboard structure with iron-barred windows, that resembled a prison. Later we learned that the partly insane and the feeble-minded patients were housed there.

A very old lady with her head bound in a cloth answered our knock at the door.

"May we see Miss Mary," I asked with many misgivings.

"Yes, she's in the back room." she replied with a blank look.

We walked through the dimly lighted hall about seven feet wide where several inmates were sitting around a large heater. When they saw us coming they scuttled away into the adjoining rooms like rats seeking shelter.

When we reached Miss Mary's room she was reclining in her rolling chair close by the window. Disease had cruelly deformed 2 her hands. In one of them she held the Sunday paper. The other grasped a 16-inch forked reed, with which she turned the pages. Sensing our presence she looked up with the friendliest blue eyes I have ever seen,. Her cordial greeting dispelled all of our fears and [as?] we informed her of our mission she said softly:

"I'm so glad you came. Indeed! I do want you to hold services. Jennie!" she called, as a rather stout black-haired woman came in to replenish the fire, "Call the others into my room. These young ladies have come to sing and pray with us."

Upon hearing her voice, several of the inmates ventured out and joined us. When the services were over, to all felt that it had been good to be there. As we [bade?] her goodbye she said sincerely:

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"Come back soon. I am a member of the Catholic Church [but?] I am deeply interested in all denominations."

During the years since that day we have kept in close touch with Miss Mary. As we have come to know her better, her undying faith in her friends and her God have been a constant inspiration.

Today when I called to ask for her life history the same cheery smile greeted me.

"Oh! I'm so glad to see you. Come right in and give an account of yourself. I haven't seen you since Easter."

"I have thought of you a great deal, Miss Mary." I explained. "Although many things have kept me away."

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"I understand, and now that you are here tell me about yourself. Jennie, cut off the radio, we want to talk."

"Me, Miss Mary," I said quickly, "I want you to talk and tell me the story of your life. I know it will be interesting."

"How could I tell anything that would be of interest to anyone. I have spent the past 37 years in a rolling chair. [However?], I will be glad to tell you [what?] I can."

She chuckled and went on: "I am like the woman who moved off the big road who said, 'I don't know nothin'!"

"The old couple moved back in the woods off the big road and on Sunday they went to a church close by. The sermon was on the Crucifixion of Christ. The old woman said:

"'thar now they done killed Christ and we didn't know nothin' about it.'"

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"A few weeks later they attended church again and the sermon this time was an the Resurrection. The old woman said to her husband:

"that settles it John, we are movin' back up on the big road where we will know sumpin', for now Christ has been back and we never got to see him! I tells you I'm movin' back, I'm not stayin' here."

Glancing up at the clock Miss Mary said hurriedly:

"Excuse me please and tell Jennie it is time to make coffee. I keep a pot and some coffee in my room and have Jennie make it on the heater for Mrs. Lyons and the others, who would not eat their lunch if they didn't have a cup of hot coffee. They only serve coffee night and morning from the kitchen.

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"I don't believe I told you about Jennie. She was in [Milledgeville?] at the State Sanitarium but because they were so crowded they sent her here. She is perfectly harmless unless some one crosses her. I have taken her under my care and she helps me in a great many ways. I try to keep her busy and in this way keep her out of trouble. If she does get mad with anybody, the superintendent has to lock her up for several days."

"She must be quite a problem," I commented.

"Oh, no! she said quickly, "I am kind to her and divide what I have with her. She as sufficient mentality to realize that I am her friend and I get along well with her. My friends marvel that I am not afraid of her, for she has stood over me many times with a stick and threatened me, but I'm not afraid. Usually, she soon realizes what she is doing and begs me not to tell the superintendent."

At this point the Negro convict woman began bringing in the trays with the noon meal for the inmates, who were not physically able to go to the kitchen or were insane and not

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permitted there. The convict woman brought the cups to Miss Mary's room and filled them with the steaming coffee. Her tray was placed on the table and after everybody had been served, one [of?] the women placed it on her [?] breast for she can barely raise her head and her body is only elevated slightly. She managed to feed herself in an amazingly deft manner for on in such an apparently helpless condition. The tray was arranged attractively and was adorned with an embroidery scalloped cloth, which was her own handiwork. When she had finished she called softly:

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"[Emma?] take the tray now. Be sure to put the bread in the box on the dresser and the scraps in my cat box." Looking up at me she explained: "I always keep enough to feed Tom, my cat. One day last week I was looking out of the window and saw a cat, that had apparently been struck by a car and was badly crippled. I had it brought in to me and fed it until it was well."

"What are you saving the bread for?" I asked curiously.

"Oh! the bread, that is for my birds. Every morning they gather in the yard under my window and chirp to let me know they are there. Then I call Jennie to feed them. They are really my friends, for when I plant my flowers garden they catch the worms that would destroy the flowers before they could bloom."

"Do you mean you have a flower garden?" I asked in amazement.

"Oh yes!" she replied with a smile. "The superintendent is very kind. He always has a man to prepare the ground in the spring, my friends furnish the plants and seeds, and I direct from my window. There is always someone kind enough to water the flowers for me and I enjoy watching them grow and bloom, so much. Last spring my sweet peas were very pretty. Had you come to see me you could have had all you could pick. Fore three Sundays I sent enough for the altar at my church, and one day I furnished 37 dozen to decorate the parsonage for a wedding. I had a few roses, but I'm not so successful with

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them, because I don't have anybody to spray them for me. My chrysanthemums were also very beautiful.

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"Our superintendent's son died a short time ago." Miss Mary continued. "He was sick for a long time and I sent him a bouquet every other day during his entire illness. I used the last of the chrysanthemums for the funeral of Mr. Bishop, one of the inmates, who was killed by an automobile last week. He was deaf and partially blind.

"Jennie, hand me my work. I want to [finish?] the applique on this scarf for Miss Grace. She wants it for a Christmas present.

"You won't mind?"; she questioned. "You see my eyes give me trouble and I can't work fast. I'll work and talk at the same time."

When she had gotten comfortable she asked: "Now, where do we begin?"

"Start as far back as you can/ /and tell everything." I answered.

"My father, John Thomas Lindsey," she began. "was a native of England. He was born near Liverpool and came to America when he was 15 years old. His older brother, Michael, was the first of the family to come over and as soon as he had accumulated enough money he returned to England and brought my grandmother, my Aunt Harriet, and my father with him.

"He, my father, completed his education after he came to the United States and was a professor in the Leesville College (South Carolina) when he died. My mother, Frances Shirley was born in Leesville but her parents were native Germans. I was only 20 months old when my father died and my mother moved to Columbia 7 to live with my uncle Michael.

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"Two years later my mother married again and my uncle asked to be allowed to keep me with him. She consented readily and that was the only home I have ever known.

"Oh yes, I saw my mother once a week but she was very busy with her new family. There were twelve in all. I still have four half brothers and two half sisters living in South Carolina. I also have one sister living in Augusta. She came out to see me one day last week.

"My troubles began early in life." Miss Mary continued. "For when I was only ten years old I was stricken with ankylosis, and for six months I was unable to walk or otherwise help myself. The whole family was so eager and willing to do for me that my recovery was somewhat retarded. It required effort on my part to get well, but I did improve slowly.

"I was in the fifth grade at St. Peter's School in Columbia when I took sick and the following September I returned to school and again took up my 5th grade work and was promoted to the 6th grade at Christmas.

"My health remained good and I was graduated from High School at the age of 16.

"All during that time the disease remained dormant and only occasionally after running or walking fast would I feel the slightest discomfort. I never had a pain after I was 17 or 18 years old and I thought I was entirely cured."

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Miss Mary continued thoughtfully: "There was no reason now why I shouldn't be happy and when my husband asked me to marry him I consented gladly. When I found I was to become a mother I was overjoyed. My baby girl came on January 6, 1893 but she only lived [8?] weeks. The next year my boy was born and lived 4 hours, and in 1898 I gave birth to a still-born child.

"My old trouble began to worry me again after my first child was born and for three years I used crutches. My husband sent [me?] to Hot Springs, Arkansas. I went [away?] walking

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with crutches and was brought back on a stretcher. The doctors pronounced my case hopeless. I next went to a specialist in Philadelphia [who?] gave me electrical treatments. This only made me sore and more painful so we bought a rolling chair and in it I have spent my days since that time.

“Yes, I go to [bed?] at night. Two of these girls turn my chair around by the side of the bed and roll me on it. My husband spent a lot of money trying to cure me, in fact all that he had. I now began to be resigned to my fate and to try to plan some way to help him as we had four children to raise and educate.”

I inquired with great surprise: “Children?”

“Yes, she answered smilingly. “You see, I married a widower with four children. The oldest was three years and 2 months and the youngest were twins of 14 months. The children's grandmother lived with us and took care of them.

“About this time I had completed my plans to increase our income. 9 I rented a house with twenty-nine rooms, and every bit of it that was not required for the family, I furnished for boarders. With the help of the foreman of the railroad shops, who recommended my place to his men, I soon had about twenty regular boarders and about thirty-five or forty who took their meals with me. This friend also collected the money from the men and I never lost a penny.

“I knew you would ask how I managed,” she said with amusement. “Well, I had two good cooks and housemaids. I planned the meals for each day, giving the order to a clerk who came to the house each morning. I did all of the buying and paid all of the bills.

“My stepchildren were very little trouble. William, the oldest boy, graduated from [Clemson?] College. Charles, on of the twins, was in his last yea at Clemson when he was killed while working with a bridge gang during his vacation. The two girls married while they were still in High School.



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"I operated the boarding house for 15 years but, when the children's grandmother died I had to close it. The children were all married and my husband and I decided to live for a while just for ourselves. We rented a small cottage next door to the big place and were so happy. My husband had been working for the Shad Building Company for twenty-eight years, eleven or which he had served as foreman of the shop. I kept two servants and although I was confined to my chair and was 10 scarcely ever free from pain, I was contented and happy."

Miss Mary seemed to be enjoying greatly these reminiscences of happier days. She went on thoughtfully: "Wanting something to occupy my mind during the daytime, I joined the [Conevelent?] Society of our Church, and began to plan ways in which I could help. At that time I could sit up in my chair and had fairly good use of my hands. I bought an electric motor for my machine and took in plain sewing. I made quite a bit of money and was truly happy for them I was able to help those less fortunate than I, especially little children. I was amply rewarded when I could bring a smile to a little face. At Christmas and at Thanksgiving I always arranged a dozen or more baskets for the poor."

"And you did all this yourself Miss Mary?" I asked in amazement.

"Yes, I cut and did the sewing and directed all of the work. Of course, I had to have someone always at hand for I couldn't walk even with a crutch, as my legs were stiff. I know that God was using me for his work, because I had prayed so hard that if it could be in accordance with his will, to restore my health. I also prayed, however, that if I could serve him better in my chair, to let me stay in my chair, so I know that it is His will.

"And then my greatest trouble came. In 1909 my husband was stricken with intestinal trouble and after/ a two weeks illness he passed away. I was indeed alone then for all of the family had moved away. My sister, who lived in Augusta, had been urging me for some time to come to her and let Dr. Michel treat me.

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So to please her I sold out and came to live with her. The doctor broke all of my joints and put them in plaster of paris. When he finally removed the casts my arms and legs were straight. I told him that it would never do, that he must rebreak and fix them back like they were. For I must have even the little use I had of them restored if there was any possible way.

"The doctor was astounded and couldn't understand why I wanted to undergo the agony of having my joints broken again. But, you see, I have been able to work with my hands and still be of service. I have earned on an average of \$110 a year with my embroidery hoop and needle. I furnish my room, my bed linen, clothes, and pay for my laundry.

"During the war I saved \$125." And now there was real pride in her voice.

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "So you have a bank account."

"Not now," she answered. "I spent it long ago."

"Well," I said with assurance, "I'm certain of one thing, you didn't spend it on yourself."

"No," she replied smilingly, "But it went for a good cause. However, I do have enough to bury me. My grandmother deposited \$150 in the bank for my burial expenses more than thirty years ago. She knew I couldn't get any insurance and the interest has helped a little too.

"I came to the home twenty-eight years ago last July. My sister was good to me but I couldn't see plainly that taking care of me was killing her. We were not able to hire a servant and she insisted upon lifting me from the bed to the chair. I took [matters?] in my own hands and had friends make the necessary arrangements for me to be brought here. Sister was very much hurt when I told her about it, but I knew that she has come to realize that it was for the best. She lost her home during the depression and her husband hasn't had regular work for years."

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"Have you been happy here, Miss Mary?" I asked.

"Well," she answered slowly. "I can't say I haven't been happy. For a long time they would roll me out on the porch when the weather was pretty and I enjoyed the sunshine as much. I also liked to talk to the inmates. But for the past 7 years I have stayed in my room and sat by the window looking out on my garden, and to the Heavens from whence cometh my help. Some day all the knots and bumps in my body will be straight and I will walk again in the Glory of God."

"You must have indeed been lonely during all these years." I told her. "A person of your intelligence to spend every day surrounded by insane and feeble-minded people. Have you been here all the time?"

"Yes, I have been right in this room for 28 years. Perhaps I would have been lonely had I spent my time just being sorry for myself. You see I have had a wonderful opportunity for serving others."

"I know you have done much to brighten other lives." I said.

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"Would you mind telling me some of the things you've done?"

"I don't like to talk about what I've done for others." She said slowly. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes." I replied. "Please tell me."

"Well, to begin with, all of the inmates in this building are old, and they are sick for a good part of the time. When one of them is seriously ill I stay awake at night and see that his medicine is given on time, measuring the dose myself to be sure its right. When one dies I have an electric switch on my bed and I ring for the matron. However, while this small

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service has been its own reward there have been three outstanding days that were the happiest of my entire life:

“One day while I was out on the porch, news was brought to me that one of the men had died suddenly. I was talking to another of the inmates at the time and he said quickly: ‘A good [thing too?], for he was too mean to live. He just [curses?] all the time and is awful to live around.’

“don't say that.” I told him. “‘I'm so sorry to know that he died without a moment to repent. If he had been a good man it wouldn't worry me.’ The small seed thus sewn fell on fertile ground, for the next day Mr. Franklin came back and seemed to be worried. After a while he began to talk. ‘Why are you upset and worried over the death of an unsaved man, especially one of that class? And I also want to know what church you belong to.’

“I told him I was a Catholic and he exclaimed: ‘A Catholic interested in other people! I never heard of such a thing!

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He then went away quickly without another word.

“Several days passed before I saw him again. After talking for a few minutes he asked me if I would send the priest to see him, which I did. In a very short time Mr. Franklin's health began to fail rapidly. One day he came to see me and asked me to write a letter for him and also to make out a check for him to sign, which would take care of his burial expenses. When I had done these things for him, I asked him about his soul: ‘Have you made your peace with God?’

“‘Yes, Miss Mary,” he answered softly.” Three months ago I joined the church and I'm all right. And I want to tell you that it wasn't any preaching that did it. All of it was due to the life you live and the example you set.’

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"Another of my happiest days was the time when a lewd woman was sent out here from the stockade. She saw the priest come out one morning and give me communion. She came over a little later and told me that she would like to have a pricher notice her. Later, she confessed her sins, repented, and was ready to go when she died a short time afterward.

"Another time there was a terribly wicked old couple here. One day the wife had an awful fight with her husband, because he had given a chew of tobacco to another woman. The superintendent heard about the fight and told her that it must never happen again. She accused me of tattling on her and gave me a good cursing out, using terrible language.

"For five long years I pleaded with that woman, begging her to 15 change her ways and asking her to pray. When I would mention prayer she would rave and say all sorts of dreadful things. One day she said: 'My brains will be clabber when I believe in all that [rot?].' But would you believe it, before she died she accepted Christ and prayed daily. This was the last of the three happiest experiences of my life here in the home."

Disease has taken heavy toll through the years and today every joint in Miss Mary's body is stiff. Her arms are bent at the elbows and she has not been able to straighten them [for?] years. Her fingers are drawn and are gradually dwindling. She can only move one of her hands at the wrist and it is impossible to bring them nearer than 6 inches apart. She is also unable to touch her face. Despite these handicaps she continues to work. By using a 7-inch embroidery hoop she makes pillowcases, tablecloths, and [scarfs?] in drawn work, embroidery and applique. She has also make several silk and velvet quilts.

"There is just one more question I would like to ask, Miss Mary." I said. "Why are you always cheerful and never complain in spite of the pain you must bear?"

"That, my friend, is for a selfish reason. If I was a [complaining?], faultfinding person with a tale of woe to tell everyone, I would soon lose all of my friends and nobody would want

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to come about me. I would then be a very lonely person, for I love people and not to have them come about me would be like closing the door to Paradise.”